

Black Dog Writing Competition 2008 Judges Comments

Myth or Fact?: “Young people can’t suffer from a mood disorder, can they?”

If there was ever a myth-busting experiment to test the above statement, then this year’s Black Dog Institute writing competition was it. Titled ‘Grassroots Solutions’, the competition encouraged adolescents and adults looking back to their teenage years, as well as carers and significant others, to discuss the topic of mood disorders in adolescence. Entrants could choose to submit a poem or an essay no longer than 1500 words.

What resulted were more than 150 entries from all over Australia written by people of all ages. There was a great representation of teenagers of today as well as recollections from adults about what it was like as a teenager living with mainly depression or bipolar disorder. Powerful, emotive, poignant, sensitive, captivating, honest, entertaining, moving, humorous and inspiring are just some words to describe the calibre of this year’s entries. Mood disorders do not discriminate and adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time. All entrants were commendably articulate in describing what an upheaval to life it can be to have or to witness the onset of a mood disorder at this complex developmental stage. Common themes included how confusing life can be when a mood disorder strikes, the relief that accompanies disclosing this to family, friends and professionals, and the reassurance that what is being experienced has a name and can be treated. People also described how suffering from a mood disorder in adolescence can have a profound effect on a person’s ability to manage at school and sustain relationships with family and peers. There were many helpful and practical coping strategies suggested. Above all there was a great sense of hope that adolescents with a mood disorder can get better.

The Black Dog Institute’s annual writing competition continues to attract such quality entries that the tradition of creating a book from these will surely be achieved. This will provide another great, inspirational Black Dog resource to our young people, their carers and loved ones, and to professionals for many years to come. This was the inaugural poetry competition. With the high standard of poems, the judges hope it will remain a category in future writing competitions.

We thank all entrants for the opportunity to read their great essays and poems. It has been a very enjoyable and educational experience. Clearly, early intervention is a key. We are really thrilled that these entries will help adolescents and others and their carers, not to forget the mental health professionals who diagnose and treat adolescent mood disorders.

We hope that you enjoy our choice of winners and highly commended entries.

*Lets declare the myth that “Young people can’t suffer from a mood disorder”
completely busted!*

Dr Tanya Hanstock

Leon de Bord

Lydia Turner

Black Dog Writing Competition 2008 Winners and Highly Commended Awards

Poetry

1st Prize: *Growing Pains* (#129): Structurally elegant and captivatingly readable, this poem perfectly sums up many of the hormonal, peer group and school-driven issues and stresses of growing up with the overlay of mental illness. It is very much in tune with today's teenagers and, as such, is enlightening for everyone. Guiding the reader through the pressures and temptations of adolescence, the complications of illness, and the message of turning each setback into a lesson and a win, this poem was our clear winner.

Highly Commended: *Swimming Towards The Light* (#42): Brilliantly written, this poem elucidates different aspects of depression, harmonising each aspect with distinctive rhythms. An adult reflecting on his experience with depression during adolescence, this author delicately highlights strategies that worked and lessons learnt; all instilled within a framework of beauty and hope.

Essays

1st Prize: *And Then My Tears Subsided* (#126): This eloquent essay emotively describes the difficulties of being an adolescent and starting to experience depression and not knowing what it is and who to tell. It describes the relief of disclosing this to family for the first time and also how, with the help from others, depression can be overcome.

2nd Prize: *What To Do When It's Hard To Walk* (#45): Near-terminal pain gripped this essayist at age 13 and he takes us through his chilling story to control at age 23. Clarity in his writing leaves the reader with no doubt about what mental illness can be like. Great beauty in this essay lies in the circle it traces to becoming a teacher and telling a large student group that pain or depression has to be dealt with as a step towards being a better human.

3rd Prize: *The Sensitive Steam Engine* (#73): This beautifully written essay uses the metaphor of a steam engine to capture the different obstacles faced by a sufferer of a mood disorder. Tracing over events using a timeline-approach, the message driven home to the reader includes the importance of recognising the signs of relapse, managing intense emotions, and strategies that may help.

Highly Commended:

- 1. *Kipper* (#76):** This essay poignantly discusses the subsequent feelings of grief and loss following the suicide of a close friend. It highlights the negative impact of suicide on those left behind, while providing valuable advice without preaching. The author importantly emphasises the need for honest communication between sufferers of mood disorders and their therapists.
- 2. *Unsure of Why Depressed* (#117):** The confusion of not knowing why one is depressed is the topic of this essay. Furthermore, getting help from professionals such as school counsellors, psychologists and doctors is also highlighted along with the relief that can occur when hearing the neurochemical explanation of mood disorders.
- 3. *Shakespeare* (#102):** Does depression make you 'unnatural'? This writer thought so when they read, 'I do forgive thee, Unnatural though thou art' in *The Tempest*, perhaps Shakespeare's finest work. There's a clear and powerful message in this essay about obstacles to seeking help or the lack of a language

to deal with the illness, and of the need to make mental health a significant part of the school curriculum.

4. ***Remember, Remember (#33)***: Families play a major role in helping adolescents with mood disorder as this essay shows. Being creative, working as a team and never giving up hope are the fundamental ways that families can help their adolescent with a mood disorder.
5. ***The Devil and Me (#100)***: This essays discusses the way that bipolar disorder in adolescents can take a person on such an adventurous journey of highs and lows that they use the metaphor of living with a seductive "devil" This essay points out many ways to manage bipolar disorder and to have a stable and satisfying life.
6. ***Law Firm (#57)***: This essay discusses mood disorders, suicide, and the abuse of drugs by members of the legal profession in an effort to cope with high-pressure jobs. In a dignified approach, it highlights the fact that mental illness does not discriminate; addresses the role of medication in mood disorders; and emphasises the importance of open communication.
7. ***Being Diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder (#108)***: This rich, delightful essay traces the issues of cultural and health of a Greek teenager with bipolar disorder: his twin asked if it meant being able to live at both the North and South Poles! The pain is balanced with humour and engaging school rebellion. And optimism. He writes: "The nature of people is to survive. So that's what I plan to do."
8. ***Living with Depression and Moebius Syndrome (#9)***: This essay discusses how difficult it is having both depression and moebius syndrome as an adolescent. The difficulties of taking medication along with helpful coping strategies for adolescents are discussed.
9. ***The Day the Music Died (#60)***: This essay reveals a mother's struggle to find support and to access treatment to address her daughter's mood disorder. It sends a strong message, highlighting the needs for long-term support and problems with the current health care system.
10. ***It is not Something Adolescents Talk About (#120)***: Diagnosed with manic depression (bipolar disorder) as an adult, this writer looks back with keen insight at an "adolescence crippled with the feeling that something was wrong", hiding feelings and alienation. There are strong messages about how teenagers should and should not try to function. A theme in other essays is also made strongly: educate adolescents about mental health as you (they) are educated about sex. This adult would, if they could, tell their 16-year old self that "there is so much more to life than those teenage years".